

a kingdom of priests

I have a question that I want to invite you to consider this morning – a question that I want us to explore together this morning in scripture... Here's the question:

What is your role and responsibility in this church?

If you had to write down an answer to that question, what would you write? Honestly.

We'll come back to this.

Ok, so I want to start this morning with a confession: **I have mixed feelings about people calling me "Pastor Scott"**. And I mean that. It's a complicated matter for me – something I both receive with thankfulness, and at other times, really kick against.

Let me explain.

I'll never forget the first time it happened. I was 22. I'd just graduated from university and had been invited to be the interim pastor of my church while **our pastor** took a much-needed sabbatical. We were a small church – with one pastor – and I was already an elder and an active leader in the church. That said, I'd never preached two Sundays in a row, and here I was on deck for **11 Sundays** – and meeting with people who could be my parents, helping them discern

God's work and call in their lives in the face of blended marriages, addictions, spiritual longings and relational brokenness.

I was way over my head.

And one day, in the middle of that summer, with my skateboard in hand, I hopped on the bus in my town and glanced back to see Sarah – one of the 20-somethings in our church sitting in the back of the bus with a friend. We waved to each other across the bus, and not wanting to cut in on their conversation, I slipped into a seat by myself mid-way back...

And then it happened, a block or two down the road, I overheard Sarah say to her friend, "***That's my pastor***".

I'm sure my face lit up in that moment. I still does, at the thought of it.

What an honor to be Sarah's pastor.

About a month ago, something similar happened. Some of the elders and I went to pray with Peter and Pat Hildebrand – Peter had asked us to come. And Rick and Karen Johnston joined us as well. And at the close of our time – after we said "Amen" – Karen turned to me and said with deep gravity – "**Thank you pastor**".

Me? *I could be her son. Karen's been seeking and following Jesus longer than I've been alive. **And she knows it.*** And yet she called me and calls me – "Pastor".

It's humbling. I consider it a grace to be called "pastor". There is a holy gift and gravity to it – a responsibility and authority conveyed and understood. I'm honored to think that some would call me their pastor. It's a humbling gift.

But there is also something **jarring** about it. Jarring on a theological level, and thus a very practical level.

Ultimately, it comes down to a matter of **ecclesiology** – our understanding of the church (that's what **ecclesiology** is all – our thoughts about the church – gr. *ecclesia*).

For me, this wrestling with being referred to as "pastor" is deeply bound up in how we understand the **nature** of the church – the body of Christ.

The **identity** of the church → and the **calling** that flows from it.

Which is something we need to continually revisit – because if our understanding of **the nature, the identity, the being** of the church gets skewed, twisted or distorted, then we will *by necessity* function – we will, *by necessity*, **do church** in way that is skewed, twisted or distorted.

Because **our being** always shapes **our doing**...

If we misunderstand (subtly or not-so-subtly) our **identity** as a church, our **being**... we will, by necessity, be drawn to **do church** in

ways that are incongruous with the gospel – to the detriment of our life together as the church and our impact on the world.

Which is no good for anyone.

So, if you have a Bible with you, open it with me to **Exodus**

19:4-6.

Now, for some of you, it might seem odd to look to the Old Testament for an understanding of the nature of the church – since we don't really see the church (as we know it) until the book of Acts.

But to say that would be to miss the reality that the church is really ***the fulfillment of God's purpose*** for His people from the beginning of time. And so if we want to understand the heart of **God's purpose and intention** for the church, **God's vision** for the church – we'd be wise to turn back not just to Acts, or some other part of the New Testament, but to turn all the way back to **Exodus** – to the story of the formation of the people of God... the forming of the nation of Israel.

In the book of Exodus, we read of how God saved the Israelites, the descendents of Abraham, from slavery in Egypt. How He brought them out of Egypt, parted the waters of the Red Sea, and led them through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai. And there, at Mt. Sinai, God declared the nation of Israel to be **His people**. And God met with Moses on the mountain, and gave him a message for Israel... saying,

Exodus 19:4-6

*"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...**"*

There is so much there, but **that last line** is essential for us to grasp today – speaking to Israel, His chosen people – God said – ***"you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..."***

Now when we think of ancient Israel and the faith of Israel, many of us often are drawn to thinking about the Temple, and the priests and sacrifices – which God ordained. But we need to grasp what God said here in Exodus 19 – that **UNLIKE** all the other nations, Israel was **not** to be a nation that simply **had** priests... They weren't simply to be another kingdom **with** priests... But they were to be a kingdom **OF** priests. A priestly people. *"Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...**"*

Which is to say that every Jew, every member of the community of God's people, was in some sense, no matter what their day-to-day work looked like, ***they were all priests... a kingdom of priests...*** which gave them **all a profound responsibility** – to God and to others... A responsibility to worship God **and** to represent God to others.

This was fundamental to their identity as God's people, and therefore essential to their calling and responsibility under God.

Are you with me?

Ok, so turn with me now to the New Testament – to **1 Peter 2:9** – and listen to what the apostle Peter says ***about the church...***
about us.

1 Peter 2:9 – speaking to the church, to Christians everywhere – the apostle Peter declares, "*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*"

Do you here the undeniable echo of Exodus 19?

"You are ***a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.***"

Really, it's more than an echo, right? Peter is explicitly and openly cutting and pasting from Exodus 19. This is a straight up re-appropriation. Here, Peter, himself a Jew who now follows Jesus, knowing the ancient identity and calling of the Israelites, takes what was originally spoken ***exclusively*** to the people of Israel – ***and says it to and of the church*** – says it to and of the body of Christ – to and of all of us who are in Christ (whether Jew or Gentile).

He says, "**You** are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." Israel's calling is now your calling.

Our calling. **You are...**

Who? Who is? Is it just Me? Or just Glen and I? Or Glen, and Simon, and Kenzie and I? Everyone with the title "pastor" and gets a paycheck from the church?

Of course not! He's speaking to **the whole community** of Christians, to the **whole** church, to **every** follower of Jesus – and he refers to us **all** as "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.*"

He says, "**You are... a royal priesthood.**"

Which is why I wrestle at times with people referring to me in a special way – with a special title – "**Pastor** Scott". Because despite the fact that I am one of the few people in this room today who have an office in this building, and receive my paycheck from the church, **I am not the only pastor or priest in the room.** And not just because Simon and Glen are also in the room.

Truth is, we've got a room **full** of priests here today. There isn't just one or two or four ministers, pastors, or priests here today. But every one who is in Christ is a priest – called and given authority and responsibility to worship God, and to be the means of His ongoing revelation and ministry to one another and the world.

I'm not the only pastor or priest in the room. We are a **community** of priests. This is essential to the very **nature** of the church – **who we are** – our **being** as a church...

Which should help you understand why I have mixed feelings about being referred to as "**Pastor** Scott".

Not because I'm not actually a pastor. **I am**. This is who God has made me and my life is shaped by this. I don't want to downplay this. That's not the problem.

The problem is that I'm not the only minister in the room. Every one of us who follows Jesus has been given a new identity and calling in Jesus – a **priestly** identity and thus a **priestly** calling. And this brings with it great honor, responsibility and authority for **all of us**.

And I think that's the part that most makes me want to push back at times, when I, as opposed to the rest of you, am referred to with a title of honor, authority and responsibility.

Because this **honorable** practice can subtly or not-so-subtly end up dis-honoring you... **divesting** the rest of you of the very honor, authority and responsibility that is yours in Christ.

That **we share** in Christ.

So, don't get me wrong, it's not that I want you to think or expect less of me. But I want, no, *more than that*, I'm convinced that God wants you to think and expect more **of Him** in you and in one

another. Because, according to Him, all of us who are in Christ are priests – vested with incredible honor, authority and responsibility in the church and in the world because of Christ.

Hence my question at the start: "**What is your role and responsibility in this church?**"

Sadly, I think we've often missed this in our understanding of the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" (which is what we're talking about here).

You see, often we've understood the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" to mean, simply, that we no longer **need** a priest. That because of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, we can know and relate to God *directly, personally*, without the need for any mediator. Because Jesus Himself is our mediator.

And this **is true** – **so true** and central to the gospel... Because of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, you and I are invited to know God **personally** – to speak directly to Him, to read scripture and hear the voice of the Spirit personally, to confess our sins directly to God, to receive His forgiveness, to experience His grace and love by His Spirit.

We don't need a priest to do this for us, or on our behalf. God invites us, through Christ, to come **to Himself**. To know Him **personally**.

In Christ, we **all** have access to God. We can come right to the throne of grace and meet with God. This is one of the primary gifts of the gospel.

Which is why I sometimes **cringe** when I'm with a bunch of Christians for a meal, and just before we eat, the group turns **to me**, expecting me to pray – because I'm "the pastor", right?

Sometimes I've actually said "no". Because God receives my prayers no different than that of any other Christian. **If we are in Christ then we are in Christ** – accepted by the Father. Doesn't make any difference where you get your paycheck – be it from the church or from **Island Health** or **Discovery Coffee**. We all have direct access to God – in and through Christ. Accepted by God because of Christ.

But if that's all we get out of **1 Peter 2:9**, then we've actually missed so much.

So, let me ask you: Is this what **1 Peter 2:9** is all about? That because of Jesus we no longer need a priest...?

Well, as far as I can see, **no!** I mean, yes, this teaching is true and biblical, and other scripture makes this clear (particularly in the letter to the Hebrews). This is key and core to the new covenant established in Christ. **Because of Jesus, you and I can go straight to the Father in prayer, in confession, in worship...**

But Peter's main concern in this passage and letter is not that his readers, and you and I, would know that we no longer need a priest, but that you and I, every follower of Jesus, **are now priests**, called and enabled to minister to God, to one another and to the world around us. **And this priestly ministry, far from being unnecessary, is actually desperately needed today – in the church and in the world – as it always has been.**

But wait a second, I thought **I**, and a few others, were the ones called to ministry here, and **you** were called to be subject to and supportive of *our* ministry. Right? Isn't that the way it works? Isn't church the time and place where I and a few others get to *do our stuff* and minister to you, and you get to come and receive, and sing along, and put a few bucks in the plate (kinda like a tip). Isn't that the way it works?

We probably wouldn't say that, if asked directly, but how often have we (or I, in the past) viewed our only responsibility in reference to church as *showing up? And maybe tithing.*

*And yet Peter says to **all** of us: **You** are a royal priesthood.*

You are... We are... The church – all of us – **we are** a community of priests...

All of us, in Christ, have this calling, authority and responsibility.

And Peter is **even stronger than this**. He doesn't just say that you are called to be priests, he says that you **are** a royal priesthood.

This is who you **are** as a follower of Jesus, and who we **are** as a church. And so in a sense, Peter is saying to us, "Wake up to who you are, and be who you are".

It's not about trying to be something that you are not. You **are** a royal priesthood. Just be who you are – servants of King Jesus. Embrace this, and live out of it.

Ok, but why? Does it really matter? Why is this such a pressing matter?

Because this is how God works... This is how the revealing, redeeming, reconciling ministry of Jesus continues to happen today... This is how people continue to encounter Jesus and hear His voice and experience His embrace today... ***through His people following Him in holy love for one another...***

In Christ, God has not done away with the priesthood. **Just the opposite!** In Christ, God has called us all into the priesthood – into priestly work. That we might be the means of His ongoing revelation and ministry to one another and to the world today.

And I, for one, need it. And I suspect you do to. Because this is how God made us. And this is how He works.

Let's be honest, most of us have a hard time hearing what God is saying to us – for us – at times, or maybe often. I know for me, as much as I can often clearly sense and understand God's heart **for another**, I'm often at a loss to know what God is saying to me in the midst of whatever I'm facing...

And over the years, I've come to realize that this is how God has made us.

And not only that, but **this is God's intention and way.**

Think about it: When God really wanted to reveal Himself to us, what did He do? Did he shout from the sky? Did he drop a book out the heavens? Did he write something in the sand? No, **he became incarnate. He took on flesh** (that's what incarnation means) and He walked among us as one of us.

The Incarnation is not just something God did once, for a brief time, centuries ago. No, **it is His way.**

Incarnation is God's way.

From the beginning, this has **always** been God's way.

And so, in his grace, he has made us, His followers, into a community of priests, and He has given us His Spirit that we might fulfill our calling as His people – **that now through ordinary Christians like us**, Jesus would continue to reveal Himself and minister to us, among us and to the world... all the time, wherever we

all, even on a morning like this – despite the fact that only a few of us will get up front and be handed the mic.

Truth is, (and this is something that often grips me) there is so much that God wants to do among us **this morning**, so much more than what could come about through just me and Simon...

And that's totally **fine** – because the grace of God's ministry doesn't start and stop with Simon and I.

It starts and stops with God – and in Christ, by the Spirit, God has chosen and purposed to use all of us.

Lifting one another **to God** in prayer and representing God **to one another** through humble and holy acts of care, listening, encouraging, coming alongside, speaking truth, affirming grace...

Truth is, this is one of the things I love about Lambrick – about who we are and what we come from. We are a church that has sought to live with this understanding of the church from our earliest days. It's one of the gifts of **our Brethren roots**. We come from a movement of Christians that have sought to live deeply from this understanding – that we are a community **of** priests, not just a community with a priest.

*So who around you needs to experience God's nearness today?
Who around you needs to experience God's listening today?
Who around you needs to hear God's voice today?
To know God's forgiveness...?
God's companionship?
God's grace today?*

Well, **call of pastor!**

Maybe...

But maybe the one most needed **is you...**

Christ in you...

So, let me ask you one more time:

What is your role and responsibility in this church?

Let me close with another moment from my journey. A moment that forever reminds of me of this beautiful truth...

It was the fall of **2003**. A couple years after that moment on the bus. I was now 26, married, pastoring a new church plant, and I had no idea what I was doing. I was way over my head. (*story of my life*)

And I had some very low days. Days, if not weeks, when I felt very alone, so exhausted by life and my responsibilities, and just longing to experience God's nearness and refreshing.

And in the midst of this, much because of this, I ended up going to a National Church Planters Congress in Vancouver, **longing** for God to meet me there. And I'll never forget, at the close of the last night, I found myself sitting on the floor up near the front and my dear friend

Mona came and sat with me. **(Now remember, I was the pastor. Mona was a nurse – but Mona followed Jesus).**

And so, she came and sat with me and prayed for me. She wrapped her arms around me – as a good friend can do – and she spoke God's heart over me. **And in that moment, through Mona, God met me.** In that moment, through Mona, I knew God embracing me. comforting me. counseling me. affirming His heart for me. Mona was a priest to me in that moment, the flesh and bones means of God's revelation and ministry to me. A revelation and ministry that I desperately needed.

I have no idea what the pastor or speaker said that night, or any song we sang, but I went home thankful for **the priesthood of all believers** – and for the ministry of Jesus through an ordinary Christian like Mona...

Reality is, this is not an uncommon need or a rare experience for me or for any of us. **All of us need a priest at times**, if not often. Which means that all around us are women and men, young and old, who need to know the reality of Christ today. Who need to know His comfort, His counsel, His attentiveness, His kindness, His wisdom, His nearness. And God's desire, intention and delight is that they would know this through us – through you and through me. Stepping up and following Christ in holy love and humble faith – for one another.

This is what it means to be a church – a royal priesthood.

Let's pray.